Interview with Dr. Clayton Linkous, former lieutenant commander assigned to HMM-364 (the "Purple Foxes") in Vietnam. Conducted by Jan K. Herman, Historian of the Navy Medical Department, 12 May 2005.

Where are you originally from?

Down near Logan, WV. I went to Virginia Tech and joined the military there, and then I went to Medical School at West Virginia University. I interned at Bethesda Naval Hospital and spent a year in internal medicine there. Then I went to the flight surgeon program at Pensacola. From there to Camp Pendleton, and from there to Vietnam. Then back to Pensacola, where I spent about 3 years at the Naval Aerospace Institute. I was released and went into practice in emergency medicine.

When did you graduate from medical school?

In '66.

And you went right in the Navy after that?

Yes.

After you completed the flight surgery program and put on your wings, did you go immediately to Vietnam?

I first went to Camp Pendleton for 6 to 8 weeks for training and then went to Vietnam.

What kind of training did you get at Pendleton?

It was Field Medical School. Then I shipped over and ended up in Phu Bai. I spent about 6 months up there and then was transferred down to Danang and spent the rest of my tour flying out of there.

So you were assigned to a helicopter squadron.

Yes, HMM-364, the Purple Foxes.

What were your duties as a flight surgeon in that squadron?

It varied. You could do as little or as much as you wanted. It's funny. I was there one day and the next day I was out on the flight line. The colonel, who was actually the pilot that day, asked why I was there. I said I had to find out what was going on--to see where we were flying. He said that the last flight surgeon he saw was at the hospital. We ended up in Laos that day-- unofficially.

Was that an accident--a navigational error?

No. Officially at that time the U.S. was not conducting operations in Laos. We went to extract a recon team. I flew about 110 or 112 missions while I was over there. It varied. We weren't really assigned medevac, as such. We flew resupply, extractions, and inserts. While on our way doing these, we'd get diverted to medevacs. Our bird wasn't listed or marked as a medevac helicopter but that's what it was sometimes used for.

So they never had dedicated medevac helos?

No. The Army did but the Marines didn't. We had the twin engine helicopters.

So you flew mostly CH-46s?
Right.

Did you ever fly Hueys?
I flew in Hueys a couple of times, but 99 percent of the time they were '46s.

What was a typical day like for an insert mission? How did you equip yourself?
We had some medical equipment on board, and I equipped myself with a .45 and an M16. I wasn't supposed to but I did. We were usually assigned one or two missions. You'd either insert or extract a team. You might get interrupted by a call to medevac someone. Or a team would get pinned down and we'd have to get them out. One time there was a recon team up in the mountains being chased by a larger force of Viet Cong. We had to rescue them. Another time we had to land in the middle of a rice paddy--in water. A plane had gone down and we had to get out the survivors.

The first incident you referred to. . . I understand there were some pretty hairy details concerned with that mission.
Yes. We had to hover above a small river with the rear ramp partially under water. The Viet Cong were hot on the heels of the recon team. We could see the VC in their black pajamas. Our gunner manning the .50 laid down fire and so did I to prevent our boys from being shot in the back as they were trying to board. We couldn't let down a line to haul them in because they could easily be shot while we were trying to do that. We were afraid to land in the creek because water would get in the bird and then there would be too much weight to lift off. So while the bird was hovering, we had to get out and pull them aboard. And we had to do this while taking fire. We were outside the helicopter and actually in the water. It was deep enough to stand up but I didn't know exactly how deep it was.

So you never actually landed in the creek bed.
No. We were hovering the whole time with the rear ramp down. And with the ramp still in the water, trying to lift off was a real problem. The helicopter was tail-heavy and tilted down toward the rear. We got all the men in, but because of the steep angle, one of the recon guys began sliding off the ramp and out of the helicopter. He had slid all the way to the end of the ramp. I ran down and hung on to the end of the ramp and him at the same time. We were both hanging onto the end of the ramp until they finally cleared the water, got the ramp up, and we were able to get back in.

So, once the ramp was up, the pilot could level the helo so he could lift off.
Yes.

Where did this incident occur? Was it up near Khe Sanh?
It was up near there. I can't remember the exact coordinates now but it was in the mountainous region up there.

I had heard that it was customary to take off your flak jacket and put it on the seat beneath you.
Oh, yes. And I took a few rounds in the bottom of my flak jacket as I was sitting on it.

At least it worked.
That's right.

That would have been an embarrassing wound.
Yes, it would.

Did you have any other missions like that that you remember, or was that the most memorable?
That and another time when we went in to extract another helicopter team. It turned out there was only one survivor. The pilot, co-pilot, and the corpsman were killed. We were in part of a cemetery, swamp, and rice paddy. We went in two or three times to recover those people and took fire the whole time. The bird took a lot of hits, but, fortunately, nobody got hit.

I've heard those things will fly with their hydraulic lines shot up.
If one hydraulic line is hit, it will still fly. But we lost a couple of birds. In fact, that was another thing I had to do. As a flight surgeon, I had to go out and investigate crashes to determine what happened. In many cases too many hydraulic lines had been hit and the pilot lost control of the bird. One time a prop came off, sliced right through the helicopter, and cut one of the pilots right in two.

Is that the one that happened at Khe Sanh?
I think so. Sometimes a bird would be carrying wounded when it was shot down and we would have to go in and pull out the crewmembers.

Some days were pretty uneventful, and we'd go out and resupply outposts and bring out the wounded.

I remember one day. One of the pilots dressed up as Santa Claus in a red suit, hat, and everything. We took beer, food, presents, mail, and other stuff to several of the way-out posts that weren't getting anything for Christmas. We landed and took off six or seven times that day and never got shot at. I don't know why.

Maybe the Viet Cong thought you were bringing them presents.
Yes. It must have been a shock for them to see someone dressed like Santa Claus.

Was it normal procedure for a flight surgeon to go on these missions, or did you just decide you wanted to do it?
I wanted to do it and see what conditions were like for the guys doing the flying. I had to ground a couple of guys permanently during that year. They had just lost it and couldn't take anymore. After talking with some of them, they told me they just couldn't go on.

Occasionally, I had to ground a guy for a day or two to let him rest. Some people were flying every day. They'd go out no matter what the weather was. That's one thing about the Marines. They never left anybody behind. Day or night, they'd go out and get somebody.

It was like a family. A lot of guys didn't want to talk to the chaplain but rather to me. Some of the best sessions were down at the O-club. When they had a few drinks, they'd tell you more than at any other time.

Of course, I had routine days. I held sick call 1 or 2 days a week in the dispensary. We also did MEDCAPs (Medical Civil Action Program) medical aid to Vietnamese villagers.

Where was the dispensary?

It was at Phu Bai. It was nothing elaborate. We had five or six squadrons flying out of Phu Bai so we had enough corpsmen to cover all of them. They did a fantastic job and we lost a few good corpsmen.

Some of the flight surgeons would only fly so many customary flights a month to get their flight pay and that was it. A good friend of mine was real gung ho and athletic. When he got over there, he got scared and was transferred to a squadron in the southern part. He was flying spotter missions for the battleship so he could get his flight time. He was only assigned twice a month. On one mission, a SAM missile hit his aircraft and he was killed. If it's your time, it's your time. You can't hide from it.

So you flew pretty much every day.

I flew at least three or four times a week.

How long were you in Vietnam?

I went over in July of '68 and left the first part of August the following year so I was there 13 months.

Where did you go after that?

I left out of Danang for Okinawa. They were supposed to keep us there for 10 days to 2 weeks just to settle us down. I talked to a petty officer who was running the air base and he got me on an Army transport to Texas.

The time I spent in Vietnam was probably the best year of my medical career. I've seen a lot of people, practicing medicine now for 35 or 36 years. In emergency medicine, which is what I practice, I've seen a lot of life and death. But back then I was taking care of my friends--pilots. Intellectually, the group was above most of the others. You could correspond and talk to them and they responded that way. I've kept in touch with those guys all this time. When I got married in Las Vegas, two of the pilots flew out there, one from Chicago, one from Virginia, just for the wedding and then flew right back.

When did you get out of the Navy?

In '72. I wish I hadn't. In fact, I planned on staying in but my wife had other ideas. That's why I ended up divorcing my first wife.

Did you go into practice afterward?

I set up an emergency medicine program at one of the local hospitals in Pensacola. I did that for about 8 or 9 years. At that time, the board certification came along so I went into practice in West Virginia for 5 years, got extra training, and then became board certified. Then I came back to this area in '86 and have been in Lakeland since then.

So you have a practice there now.

Yes, in emergency medicine.

It's been 35 years since you were in Vietnam. Do ever think about it much anymore?

At times I do. It's really strange. I recall one incident in particular. Normally, we put only one corpsman on a helicopter because we didn't want to lose two. On this one flight a senior corpsman had taken a new guy who was just learning. It was his first flight and that's the one that went down. They were both killed. Just a couple of years ago someone got in contact with me. Apparently, the corpsman's fiancee had gotten pregnant but he left for Vietnam before they got married. And he didn't know she was pregnant. He was killed the fourth month he was over there. She had the baby and put it up for adoption. The little girl who came out of this tracked us down and then learned who her father was. She's actually written a book about this that she's trying to get published.

And, of course, the reunions started. We have them every 2 years and that helps bring things back. You find that most people don't want to talk about Vietnam with just anybody. But they will talk about it with people who were over there with them. Unless you've had an experience, whether it's war or childbirth, it's hard to tell someone what it feels like unless they've had the experience.